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# THE KNOCK AT THE STAGE DOOR

BY ALEXANDER WOOLCOTT

ALL about us in the theatre to-day are the players who will be the Mrs. Fiskes, the Julia Marlowes, the Laurette Taylors, of tomorrow; the young fry of the stage whose names will be big and black in the playbills of 1935 and 1940. Of these youngsters none is lovelier, none has a richer or more glowing talent, none seems more surely possessed of a little of an ancient magic, than the one named Margalo Gillmore, a fair-haired, sunlit girl who, unheralded and decently abashed, emerged out of obscurity in our theatre a few seasons ago. When, among the first of her adventures, she caught all our eyes as the daughter of the famous Mrs. Fair, those of us who had seen the John Drew plays of the early 'nineties experienced a little twinge of recollection, recalling the gangling and stringy but marvelously sweet girl who, just as shy and just as awkward, ventured forth then under the shelter of a celebrated uncle. Now we nodded our heads and whispered one to another, "She is like a new Ethel Barrymore."

But what few of us knew (though all of us might have guessed) was that she was like Ethel Barrymore in another respect. She was like Ethel Barrymore in respect to her grandmother. They both are children of the theatre, each as a matter of fact born in the fourth generation of a celebrated theatrical family. As Ethel Barrymore is the granddaughter of the famous Mrs. John Drew, so Margalo Gillmore is the granddaughter of the famous Emily Thorne, who was a favorite in London in the 'eighties. We might, I say, have guessed as much. Indeed, after watching the exits and the entrances of a dozen seasons in New York, one is minded, when the young pretenders write down from Poughkeepsie and Northampton (explaining that they will be free for all sorts of careers in June and asking how to go on the stage)—one is minded, then, to answer in this wise:

*My Dear Young Lady:*

There are many ways in which you might prepare yourself for the theatre, but one thing is essential. You may do as you think best about selecting an experienced actress for your teacher, but you **MUST** select an experienced actress for your grandmother.

Such a reply might be dispiriting in its effect, but there is wisdom in it. It says something about the theatre that is true and significant; something which, twenty-five or fifty years ago would have gone without saying, for the theatre then was still thought of as a world apart, a strange place where a black art was practiced by a gipsy folk, bred to it, doubtless, through generations, though of course one did not pretend to know enough about such people to say with any certainty.

Even to the end of the nineteenth century, this notion of the theatre as a world apart persisted. It may have been a long while ago that the laws of England classified actors along with rogues and vagabonds, and the churches there forbade them burial in consecrated ground. It may have been a long while ago that the first actresses to venture before an English audience—French hussies, they were—were hooted and pelted and generally treated in a manner so discouraging that it was clear, according to the delighted Puritan diarists of the day, that so unfeminine and offensive an exploit would never be repeated.

But it was not so very long ago that the Church of the Transfiguration in New York earned its cosy and hospitable name of the Little Church Around the Corner when it opened its doors to the burial service of an actor after a more haughty House of God on nearby Fifth Avenue had declined the opportunity. And it was not so very long ago that many of the more righteous among our preachers, when busy in exorcising the evil spirits from their communities, were rather given to using the word “actress” and the word “harlot” as interchangeable terms—both opprobrious.

It is only recently that this situation (still visible enough, of course, in some quarters) has begun to take on a slightly archæological aspect. Indeed, the pendulum has moved far in the last twenty-five years; swinging from the day when it was assumed that no decent woman would appear on the stage to the

vague liberalism of the present day, when it is apparently assumed that any decent woman can. In such a day it is worth while pointing out that there is no art in which the force of heredity seems to play so controlling a part. To the young pretenders (by way of giving them pause, perhaps, or at least of instilling in them a little decent humility toward the house at whose doors they are knocking) it is worth while pointing out that the theatre has an aristocracy older and more deeply rooted than that which any other activity in American life can boast. The banker or the woolen merchant or the pedagogue who can say that his father and grandfather were bankers or woolen merchants or pedagogues before him, feels so great a strength and continuity in the fabric of that life that he fairly glistens with pride and with a sense of well being and security. But compared with the foremost actors of our stage, these tradesmen and philosophers are the merest parvenus.

Of this impression that the talents of the theatre are husbanded through the years, handed down from father to son, from mother to daughter, the annals of the American stage furnish repeated reminders and reinforcements. Such reminders come at odd times and in odd ways. Go into the Players Club, standing there on the south side of Gramercy Park, smoky, unpretentious and (for New York) quite thick with memories. There they will point out to you, with a certain unfathomable satisfaction, that the club, in all its years, has had but three presidents. The names of the three are written on the walls: Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson, John Drew. But what they do not point out, probably because they think of it as a matter of course, is that each of these men, in his fleeting eminence, was no *nouveau riche* of the theatre, but one born in its purple, one trained to its speech from the cradle, one bred of showfolks.

The name of Booth has been in our playbills for more than a century. It is still there. The Jeffersons were of even older lineage, and time was when a performance of *The Rivals* was managed in this country with every rôle played by one or another of the Jefferson clan. And Drew, of course, stands midway, the grandson of a popular English actor, the son of a superb comedienne, the uncle of the three Barrymores.

I watched his enigmatic smile off and on through that uncomfortable evening when two of these children of his sister were lending their potent name to a spurious play called *Clair de Lune*, a sleazy and pompous dramatization of Hugo's *L'Homme Qui Rit*. It worked itself up by easy stages to one scabrous scene wherein a degenerate Duchess made hot love to the hideous cripple with the mangled face; the part played, of course, by John Barrymore. That rôle of the Duchess seemed the most tempting in all the list of characters, and at first one wondered a little why Ethel Barrymore had passed it by and taken for herself the less palpitant part of the Queen. But, after the love scene, the reason was clear enough.

Consider, instead, who did play the Duchess. The part fell by this default to the slender, deft, uncanny hands of Violet Kemble-Cooper. Now if it be true that on our great occasions the spirits of our forbears gather around us, to brood over us, to wish us well and to watch what, of all they knew and handed on, we have remembered and kept bright—if that legend be true, what a throng of ghosts must have hovered in the wings at the Empire that night! For playing opposite to the heir-apparent of the Drew-Barrymore tradition was a young actress of an even more illustrious inheritance. Maurice Barrymore was there in the wings, of course—the handsome Barry who fluttered a thousand hearts in the days of the bustle and the redowa and the phaeton. And, of course, there was old Mrs. Drew, pounding her disapproval, I should think, with the now inaudible cane of Mrs. Malaprop. But there, too, were Fanny Kemble and John Philip Kemble and a score of other memories of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, awake in those wings because two heirs of theirs were out on the stage before an audience playing a love scene.

In writing of heredity, the word "environment" pops up as quickly and as inevitably as does the far end of a see-saw when, with firmness and conviction, you plant yourself on the other. It is difficult always to say of any player that he was born with his talent, since, just because he *was* born in the theatre, he wandered early upon the stage, and so was bent and shaped to its needs while he was young. One does not have to be a profound student of the stage to see the tremendous advantage that is held

on it by those who begin their work there so early in life that they are as unconscious of it as of the air they breathe and of the sun that warms us all. They are growing up in the theatre in the precious years when the rest of us are outside, not only not learning how to act but, by every experience and precept and taboo of the breakfast-table and the sidewalk and the school-yard, are busily learning not to act at all.

Consider for a moment the most beautiful art which the theatre of our time has known, the incomparable art of Eleanora Duse. Her biographical note in *Who's Who in the Theatre* starts off with the single, significant line, "Born of strolling players." Are we to find the explanation of her art in that fact? Or is there no need to go back of the mere fact that she went on the stage as a baby, so young that by the time she was seven she was experienced enough to take over the post of prompter, and by the time she was sixteen she had had enough training to play the foremost rôles; enough, at least, to play Juliet in a production at Verona. Sixteen and playing Juliet at Verona! The next Vassar girl who writes down in April to Mr. Belasco that every one is so good as to call her pretty and that they did all admit she was perfectly splendid as Tweenie in *The Admirable Crichton*, and that she is only twenty-one, and please would he take her under his instruction and make a star of her some day—such a one might well receive back from him just a little engraved card with this legend on it: "When she was sixteen, Duse played Juliet at Verona!"

That biographical note of hers, so rare in its bluntness among the more pretentious paragraphs which are carefully and sometimes cryptically edited to adorn such records, might, as a matter of fact, be written after most of our best names in the theatre. Minnie Maddern Fiske, E. H. Sothorn, Maude Adams—born of showfolks all and born while those folks were on tour. That was why it was possible for Maude Adams to make her first appearance on the stage at the age of nine months—her first entrance was on a platter—and why when little Minnie Maddern made her New York debut at the age of four it was as an actress who, though the advertisements at the time mendaciously announced it as her first appearance on any stage, had already

played a dozen rôles in as many towns and simply reeked of experience.

And lest it should seem from this review of the generations in respect to our players that it is only among them that this inheritance is marked, it should be noted that the same tradition can be observed at work among the other arts of the theatre. It is, therefore, worth mentioning parenthetically that the two best plays written by Americans in our time—*The First Year* and shall we say *Anna Christie*?—were the work of playwrights born of show-folks, the work of children of the theatre born on tour. And for those enthusiasts in matters of decoration who seem to feel that the actors and the playwrights are but negligible and rather annoying functionaries and that the true man of the theatre is he who dreams its scenes and brings them into being in a new beauty of line and light and color, it must be noted that their leader, too, was born on tour. For Edward Gordon Craig, before whom even George Jean Nathan bows himself in public and who was for so long a mere voice crying in the wilderness, not only had an actress for a daughter but an actress for a grandmother. It was out of the orthodox theatre of canvas palaces, flat flights of stairs and no end of grand draperies, that Craig went out to preach the new gospel. His mother, by the way, has also been a good actress. Her name is Ellen Terry.

There is a story in some old showman's memoirs of a visit paid back stage in the late 'sixties, when Tom Davey and Lizzie Madern managed the stock company out in Columbus. The visitor was all for a little idle gossip and sat down for his comfort on the nearest costume-hamper which had been pushed against the dressing room wall; whereat Davey roared with alarm and dragged him off exclaiming: "Here, don't sit there, or you'll be smothering America's future tragedienne before she has had a chance!" And he lifted the cover far enough to show that that basket was serving as temporary cradle for a red-headed baby named Marie Augusta Davey, who was destined, in time, to get out of the basket and, after a necessary and proper interval, to become Mrs. Fiske.

Such tales as that have in them the tingle of the eternal renewal of the theatre, the same tingle I felt one hot night in the Summer

of 1916, when I was watching some children in a settlement house on Avenue B, New York, perform with tremendous gravity the *Sherwood Forest* of Alfred Noyes. The boy who played Robin Hood was a striking, swarthy, unexpectedly deep-voiced youngster, who was later snuffed out in the war. The sight of his name in the programme had a little thrill in it for those of us who were out front. It was Richard Mansfield, 2nd.

So, when, from time to time, I hear a mighty sighing in the land over the fact that we have no great players any more, I manage to bear up because of my own suspicion that the next Ada Rehan is asleep tonight in a costume-hamper in some obscure theatre. And I think that, after all, we might better write to that girl in Poughkeepsie something in this wise:

*My Dear Child:*

Come if you must. You will find your way in the theatre full of the most heart-breaking discouragements and, even if you are not to be driven out of it, it is probable that the great rôles will never come your way. But you will have a daughter some day and the way will be easier for her. As for your granddaughter—why, she may play Juliet in Verona.

ALEXANDER WOOLCOTT.